

A Grand Night for Singing: Ball State Opera Theatre's First Annual Opera Gala

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Ball State Opera Theatre is continually searching for new and creative performance opportunities for its diverse group of singers. This year, along with the usual two full opera productions and opera scenes performances through opera workshop, Dr. Truitt decided to add an additional opportunity for students in the form of our first annual Opera Gala. Opera galas are commonly used as fundraising events at opera houses across the country and feature a blend of popular arias, duets, trios, and ensembles from the operatic and classical musical theatre repertoire. As the student director of this inaugural event, I learned the behind the scenes workings of casting, programming, and planning an event of this scale. I worked with Dr. Truitt to help make the first opera gala successful and ensure its support from the School of Music and its continued presence in Ball State Opera Theatre's future seasons.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Jon Truitt for advising me through this project. It was an invaluable opportunity to be able to work alongside a seasoned director and be able to help assist in the creation of such a successful event.

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PROCESS ANALYSIS STATEMENT

My three main responsibilities for the execution of the opera gala were in casting, programming, and creating program notes. The process began with an assessment of the students who would be involved. Vocal performance, music education, and music media production majors, as well as music minor undergraduates, have all been involved with opera productions in addition to our graduate, doctoral, and artist diploma students. We also wanted to include members of the voice faculty and give more experienced students the opportunity to sing alongside seasoned faculty members. While the hope was to include every student in a number, be it in an ensemble or through a duet or trio, we also wanted to look at the other singing opportunities students had throughout the year to create a balance and ensure one student wasn't loaded with solos while another student had barely anything. We wanted to make sure older students who may have been cast in smaller opera roles had features in the opera gala as well as give some talented younger singers the opportunity to sing on the Sursa stage who may not yet be experienced enough to have been cast in a role in our large opera production of the season.

After considering our singers, I assisted in choosing the appropriate repertoire. Many factors are taken into consideration when selecting repertoire including an assessment of the nature of the event and the skill sets of our singers. We decided that for our opera gala we did not want to have any arias (solo selections from an opera sung by a single singer). As students have ample opportunities to perform arias and solos in recital settings we decided the gala would be a more beneficial learning and performing opportunity if students got to participate in duets, trios, quartets, and small ensembles. In the context of an opera, a character may have one or two arias but the majority of their

singing will take place with other people. Because of this, it is vitally important that students have the opportunity to work on duets, trios, and choruses that allow them the chance to learn how to make character choices within the context of an ensemble and other skills required to successfully collaborate with their fellow singers.

In the selection of operatic scenes, we wanted to ensure the pieces we chose made sense out of context of the opera from which they came. Some operatic ensembles, while they may be beautiful, contain content too dependent on the context of an overall opera to make sense in a stand-alone setting like an opera gala. We also wanted to make sure our repertoire featured a variety of composers, time periods, languages, and dramatic settings. Love ballads are gorgeous, but an opera gala comprised entirely of slow, romantic duets will lose the interest of an audience very quickly. From an educational standpoint, it was also important to expose students to a new wide range of repertoire. In addition, we wanted to give students the opportunity to perform “standard” pieces that many professional opera houses would utilize in their own opera galas. For example, “Tonight” from the musical *West Side Story* is a standard ensemble number among opera houses because of its operatic qualities and powerful impact. From the operatic repertoire, “Au Fond du Temple Saint” from *Pearl Fishers* and “Dunque io son” from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* are well recognized and therefore often featured opera galas. We included these numbers to give students some exposure to classic musical theatre pieces that may be utilized in operatic settings as well as standards from the operatic repertoire they may be expected to know in a professional opera house.

Choosing the repertoire for the opera gala was also strongly tied to our casting choices and the singers we had to work with. Repertoire had to be appropriate for the

singers we had available, both in vocal *fach* and skill level. *Fach* refers to the singers voice type and helps classify different voices by features such as their color, weight, and range. When casting we had to consider not only a singers experience but also whether their voice would be right for the piece. For example, there is a very comical but difficult duet from *Don Pasquale* entitled "Pronto io son." We were able to include this piece by casting one of our experienced doctoral students, Kelci Kosin, alongside one our faculty members, Craig Priebe. One of our mezzo-soprano doctoral students, Maegan Pollonias, was cast in a smaller role in the spring opera. We chose a trio from *Carmen* specifically to give her a large feature in the opera gala. We also included a duet from *Le nozze di Figaro* in order to assist in promoting our spring production of the entire opera. These casting techniques mirrored the various ways a professional company uses a gala, including giving a preview of what's to come next and showcasing a beloved performer. We also decided to include a duet that featured one of our recent graduates, Mary Kathryn Brewer. Mary Kathryn had graduated with her doctorate the semester before and was an active member of Ball State Opera Theatre during her time as a student. We chose a duet from a relatively unknown opera *Arabella* that also included senior music major Kassidy Norman. It was exciting for us to bring back a recent graduate to showcase the good work that graduates of our program are doing. It also allowed Kassidy the opportunity to work with and learn from a more experienced singer.

In addition, we knew we wanted to include some pieces that students had worked on the previous semester in our Opera Workshop. Opera Workshop is a class intended to give undergraduate singers the opportunity to learn various performance practices in the opera world such as period movement, dance, and stage combat. Students are then also

given the opportunity to apply these practices in short scenes chosen specifically for their voices and current skill sets. In the fall, there were three standout scenes we wanted to include in the opera gala. One was a quartet from *Falstaff* of four voice performance majors, three seniors and one junior. The quartet was a great opportunity for these more advanced singers to have some detailed ensemble work and to have the opportunity to work on repertoire by Giuseppe Verdi, a composer whose operas are typically not done in a collegiate setting. Another piece we wanted to bring back was an ensemble number from *L'elisir d'amore*. This piece featured senior vocal performance major Lauren Fiechter and gave her a more prominent solo opportunity since she had been cast in a smaller role in our spring opera. Another benefit of the piece was that while it strongly featured Lauren, it was also a large ensemble number that included a chorus of every student in the opera workshop class. The piece was fun and comedic and gave everyone else in the class the opportunity to work on developing an individual character within the context of an ensemble.

The final piece we pulled from the opera workshop class was a duet from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that featured voice performance majors Katharine Wilhelm (a freshman) and Micah Starks (a sophomore). This duet was originally assigned to challenge these younger singers who showed great potential. The duet is lengthy and rather difficult for any singer, particularly for young singers who were only in their first few semesters of studying voice. Throughout the course of the class, it was clear that Katharine and Micah were prepared to rise to the challenge. They worked on the duet diligently and both took advantage of the opportunity to grow vocally and theatrically

within the piece. It was an easy decision to include this piece in the Opera Gala as it was a perfect opportunity to allow younger singers the chance to sing on the Sursa stage.

After the repertoire had been selected and cast, I moved on to working on the program notes for the production. Program notes are included in a program in addition to a list of the repertoire to be performed and the performers. The opera gala program notes included a short synopsis of each scene to be performed. These “blurbs” give insight to the audience on what is happening within the context of each piece. This assists with any confusion the audience may have over hearing a piece out of context of the opera it is taken from and can also help with the language barrier for the pieces in Italian, German, or French. Program notes can also include translations of pieces but due to the already long length of our program we decided to omit direct translations and just include synopses. I did utilize direct translations in creating the synopses in addition to some operatic literature and my own previous knowledge.

Another important part of our process was a “debriefing” meeting after the Monday after the gala. Myself, Dr. Truitt, as well as the two opera graduate assistants got together to discuss what went well and what could have been better. Overall, we were all very pleased with how the first gala went. There was decent attendance from students, family, faculty members, and the director of the school of music. The gala flowed well from piece to piece, there were no major hiccups, and the program was full without feeling overwhelming or too long. In terms of programming we discussed a few key things that stood out. We received lots of positive feedback about giving younger singers Micah Starks and Katharine Wilhelm the opportunity to perform a more difficult piece. It was a great opportunity for their friends, families, and teachers and mentors to see them

take the stage and show the growth they had experienced in just a year or two of undergraduate study. There were also a lot of positive responses from both performers and audience members about students having the opportunity to sing with faculty members. It was entertaining for students and faculty of the audience to see their teachers and colleagues perform and also an excellent opportunity for the performers to be able to work with and learn from someone with so much experience. We decided for next year to try and include more faculty members singing with students and to also eliminate the faculty duet we included. The inclusion of faculty members in the program was a unique and positive learning opportunity, but we decided that if we are going to use faculty as a resource the resource is best used by combining the faculty with a student rather than a faculty-only piece.

We also discussed various ways the event could grow into something much bigger. Typically, galas include some sort of reception beforehand or a “donor meet and greet” after the event. Since the goal is to use the gala as an opportunity to reach out into and connect with the Muncie community, we would love to find different and more effective ways to advertise for next year. We talked about taking a few numbers and performing at retirement homes or other community areas as well as coordinating with the school of music and other local arts locations such as Muncie Civic to explore the ways that they reach out to the community and acquire donations. In the future, we would love for the event to include a reception prior to the event and special perks for larger donations such as a meet and greet or better seats.

Overall, Ball State Opera Theatre’s first annual Opera Gala was a success. It was a great learning and performance experience for students, and entertaining and enjoyable

night for the audience, and an overall profitable event for the program. With endorsement from the director of the school of music, Dr. Ryan Hourigan, we ensured that the gala will in fact become an annual event and a permanent part of our Opera Theatre's season. This inaugural year helped set the foundations for the gala's continued success and I am eager to have the opportunity to return as an alumni in future years to see how far it will grow.

PROGRAM NOTES

"Tonight" from *West Side Story*

A famous collaboration between Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story* is a romantic musical retelling of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Nearing the end of the first act, in "Tonight" the Jets and the Sharks, the two rival teenage gangs, their leaders Bernardo and Riff, the lovers Maria and Tony, and Maria's sister Anita sing in anticipation of the events to come that night.

The Flower Duet from *Madame Butterfly*

Butterfly has been waiting for her American husband, Pinkerton, to return to Japan for 3 years. Though others have doubted her, she has never given up hope. This hope is rewarded when Suzuki finally sees an American ship in the harbor, and in her excitement, Butterfly tells Suzuki to gather flowers and they decorate the house for Pinkerton's arrival.

"Saria Possibile" from *L'elisir d'amore*

L'elisir d'amore tells the tale of Nemorino who attempts to use an "elixir of love" to make the rich and beautiful Adina, fall in love with him. In "Saria Possibile," Adina's friend Gianetta gossips with the women of the village about how Nemorino's uncle has just passed and left him a huge fortune; a fact that Nemorino does not yet know.

"E un anathema" from *La Gioconda*

In this fiery and confrontational duet from *La Gioconda*, Laura and Gioconda are in love with the same man, Enzo. Gioconda violently confronts Laura, challenging the strength of her rival's love.

"Au Fond du Temple Saint" from *Pearl Fishers*

In this famous duet from Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles*, Nadir and Zurga recall their past experience of seeing a beautiful priestess in a temple and how their friendship was threatened by the competition for her affection. They promise each other that they will never let anything threaten the bonds of brotherhood between them.

Gypsy Song from *Carmen*

One of the most popular operas of all time, *Carmen* is set in southern Spain and tells the story of a young soldier seduced by the fiery gypsy Carmen. At the beginning of Act II, Carmen and her friends sing "Les tringles des sistres tintaient," also known as the Gypsy song, to entertain the officers.

"Crudel! Perche finora" from *Le nozze di Figaro*

A cornerstone in the operatic repertoire, *Le nozze di Figaro* tells the story of servants Figaro and Susanna as they attempt to get married and put off the efforts of their employer, the Count, to seduce Susanna. At the beginning of Act III, Susanna begins the first stage of her and the Countess' plan to out the Count by fooling him into thinking she has fallen for him.

“One Day More” from *Les Misérables*

Based on Victor Hugo’s historical novel, *Les Misérables* is a musical telling of the French Revolution. An iconic musical theatre number, “One Day More” is the climactic Act I finale that brings all of the main characters together on the eve of the 1832 Paris Uprising.

“A Grand Night for Singing” from *A Grand Night for Singing*

“A Grand Night for Singing” was originally written for the 1945 movie musical *State Fair*. The musical number quickly became a classic and was re-arranged for the 1993 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway review of the same name.

“Quell’otre! quell tino!” from *Falstaff*

Verdi’s third opera based off of a Shakespeare play, *Falstaff*’s libretto is largely based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, also incorporating scenes from *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2. In Act I, Falstaff sends two identical love letters to wealthy women Alice and Meg. In “Quell’otre! quell tino!” Meg and Alice compare their matching letters and along with Madame Quickly and Nanetta make plans to punish Falstaff.

“Dunque io son” from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*

In *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Count Almaviva has disguised himself as a poor student named Lindoro to try and win the heart of Rosina. His old servant Figaro, who knows Rosina and her ward Bartolo agrees to help Lindoro in his quest for love. Finding that Rosina returns Lindoro’s feelings, in “Dunque io son” Figaro asks Rosina to write a letter of encouragement to Lindoro.

“Aber die Richtige” from *Arabella*

In this duet from *Arabella* by Richard Strauss, Arabella is a beautiful, coquettish woman who has many suitors, while her tomboy sister Zdenka dresses up as a man because the family has no money to keep both sisters in high society. In the preceding dialogue to this scene Zdenka is angry at Arabella for shunning the advances of the lovesick Matteo and accuses her of heartlessly toying with her many suitors. Arabella explains that she will know the ‘right one’ for her when he comes along, and Zdenka relents, expressing her support for her sister’s happiness.

The Letter Duet from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Based on Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, The Letter Duet is the same scene as Falstaff’s “Quell’otre! quell tino!” In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Frau Fluth and Frau Reich have both received letters from Falstaff declaring his love for them. Upon comparing and discovering that the letters are identical, the women decide to come up with a plan to teach him a lesson.

“Pronta io son” from *Don Pasquale*

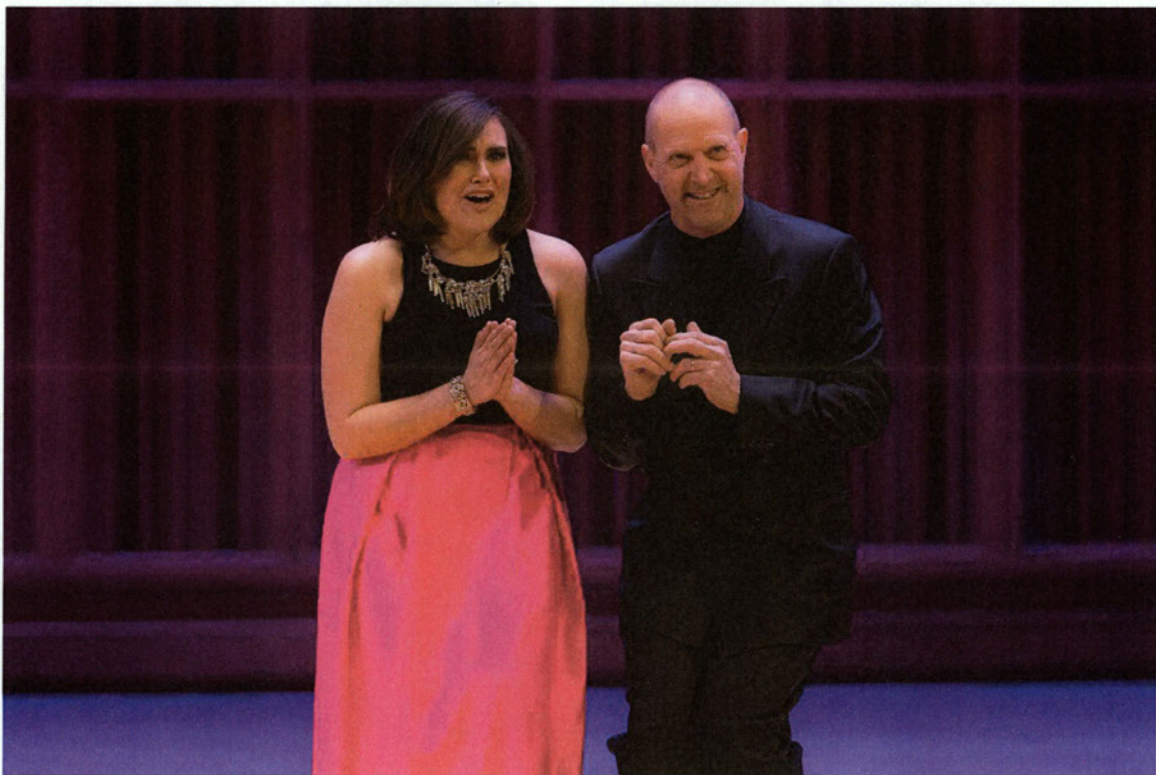
In this duet from *Don Pasquale*, Dr. Maletesta and his friend Norina plot to deceive the prideful Don Pasquale. Norina agrees to disguise herself as a common, simple-minded girl in hopes of tricking Don Pasquale into falling in love with her. Their plan set, Dr. Maletesta and Norina gloat about their clever scheme.

"Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*

The operetta *Candide*, based on Voltaire's novella of the same name, is a staple on both the musical theatre and opera stages. In "Make Our Garden Grow," the finale of the show, *Candide* resolves to marry Cunegonde and the entire company sings of "doing they best they can" to live a good and simple life.



The entire company of the Ball State Opera Theatre, including director Jon Truitt, was featured in the closing ensemble "Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*.



The opera gala gave doctoral candidate Kelci Kosin the opportunity to sing with faculty member Craig Priebe in a duet from *Don Pasquale*.



Sophomore Micah Starks and freshman Katharine Wilhelm perform a duet from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.



Mezzo-soprano and doctoral candidate Maegan Pollonias sang the lead of Carmen in the "Gypsy Song."



Music minors Bret Nguyen and Pierce Huls sang musical theatre classic "A Grand Night for Singing" alongside undergraduate vocal performance majors Micah Starks and Emma Nossem.



Lauren Fiechter and the ladies of the Fall 2016 Opera Workshop / Opera Scenes encored their performance from the previous semester of a comic ensemble from *L'elisir d'amore*.